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JULY, 1915

POLONIUS AND THE BALLAD SINGERS



GAUNT-BUILT woman and her son-in-law—

A broad-faced fellow, with such flesh as shows
Nothing but easy nature—and his wife,
The woman's daughter, who spills all her talk

Out of a wide mouth, but who has eyes as gray
As Connemara, where the mountain-ash
Shows berries red indeed: they enter now—
Our country singers!

“Sing, my good woman, sing us some romance
That has been round your chimney-nooks so long
'Tis nearly native; something blown here
And since made racy—like yon tree, I might say,
Native by influence if not by species,
Shaped by our winds. You understand, I think?”

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

"I'll sing the song, sir."

To-night you see my face—
Maybe nevermore you'll gaze
On the one that for you left his friends and kin;
For by the hard commands
Of the lord that rules these lands
On a ship I'll be borne from Cruckaunfinn!

Oh, you know your beauty bright
Has made him think delight
More than from any fair one he will gain;
Oh, you know that all his will
Strains and strives around you till
As the hawk upon his hand you are as tame!

Then she to him replied:
I'll no longer you deny,
And I'll let you have the pleasure of my charms;
For to-night I'll be your bride,
And whatever may betide
It's we will lie in one another's arms!

"You should not sing
With body doubled up and face aside—
There is a climax here—'It's we will lie'—
Hem—passionate! And what does your daughter sing?"
"A song I like when I do climb bare hills—
'Tis all about a hawk."

No bird that sits on rock or bough
Has such a front as thine;

Polonius and the Ballad Singers

No king that has made war his trade
Such conquest in his eyne!
I mark thee rock-like on the rock
Where none can see a shape.
I climb, but thou dost climb with wings,
And like a wish escape,
 She said—
And like a wish escape!

No maid that kissed his bonny mouth
Of another mouth was glad;
Such pride was in our chieftain's eyes,
Such countenance he had!
But since they made him fly the rocks,
Thou, creature, art my quest.
Then lift me with thy steady eyes,
If then to tear my breast,
 She said—
If then to tear my breast!

“The songs they have
Are the last relics of the feudal world:
Women will keep them—byzants, doubloons,
When men will take up songs that are as new
As dollar bills. What song have you, young man?”

“A song my father had, sir. It was sent him
From across the sea, and there was a letter with it,
Asking my father to put it to a tune
And sing it all roads. He did that, in troth,
And five pounds of tobacco were sent with the song

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

To fore-reward him. I'll sing it for you now—
The Baltimore Exile."

The house I was bred in—ah, does it remain?
Low walls and loose thatch standing lone in the rain,
With the clay of the walls coming through with its stain,
Like the blackbird's left nest in the briar!

Does a child there give heed to the song of the lark,
As it lifts and it drops till the fall of the dark,
When the heavy-foot kine trudge home from the park,
Or do none but the red-shank now listen?

The sloe-bush, I know, grows close to the well,
And its long-lasting blossoms are there, I can tell,
When the kid that was yeaned when the first ones befell
Can jump to the ditch that they grow on!

But there's silence on all. Then do none ever pass
On the way to the fair or the pattern or mass?
Do the gray-coated lads drive the ball through the grass
And speed to the sweep of the hurl?

O youths of my land! Then will no Bolivar
Ever muster your ranks for delivering war?
Will your hopes become fixed and beam like a star?
Will they pass like the mists from your fields?

The swan and the swallows, the cuckoo and crane,
May visit my land and find hillside and lake.
And I send my song. I'll not see her awake—
I'm too old a bird to uncage now!

Polonius and the Ballad Singers

“Silver’s but lead in exchange for songs,
But take it and spend it.”

“We will. And may we meet your honor’s like
Every day’s end.”

“A tune is more lasting than the voice of the birds.”

“A song is more lasting than the riches of the world.”

Padraic Colum

NOTE. The last stanza in the first ballad sung is a fragment of an old country song; the rest of it, with the other two ballads, is invented. But they are all in the convention of songs still sung by strolling ballad-singers. I have written the common word for pasture-field “paurk” so as not to give a wrong association: it might be written “park,” as Burns, using the word in the same sense, writes it. “Paurk” or “park” is Gaelic for pasture field, and is always used in Irish country speech in that sense. The two last lines spoken are translations of a Gaelic phrase which has been used by Dr. Douglas Hyde as a motto for his collection of Connacht love songs.

P. C.